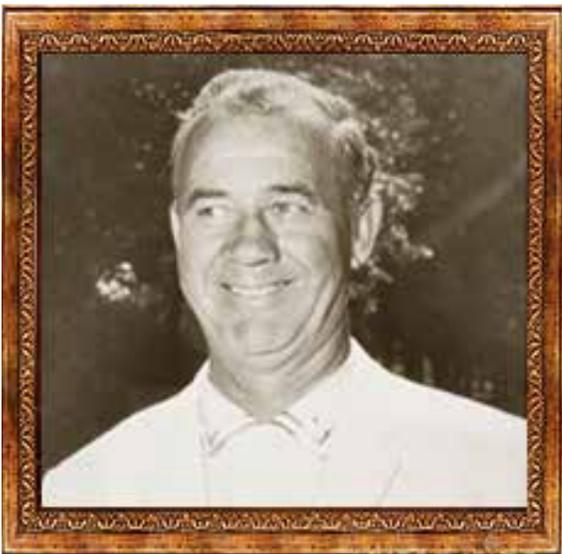




## THE RIDGEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

A MEMORABLE HISTORY OF THE RIDGEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

### *George Jacobus, Ridgewood's Head Golf Professional for More than Half a Century*



*George Jacobus*

George Jacobus was born in Brookdale, NJ at his grandmother's farm June 2, 1898. It was perhaps an omen for how George would spend his life when a few years later the land was sold to Upper Montclair Country Club for the site of its first course. His uncle, Joe Mitchell, was Upper Montclair's head pro for nine years while George served as his assistant in the pro shop.

Joe Mitchell was hired by Ridgewood in fall 1914, the year the club opened its new, 18-hole Mountain Avenue course in the village of Ridgewood. Young George followed his uncle to Ridgewood and worked as assistant club maker. He also caddied on the side. George turned professional the following year at age 17.

When his uncle moved to Montclair in 1919, George at 21 was chosen to be RCC's head professional. He was the youngest man ever to assume that position at a prestigious club.

Despite his slight build, George was a tremendously long and accurate hitter. At RCC's Mountain Avenue course, swinging a hickory shaft club, he drove to the fringe of the green on the 392 yard 17th hole. Although aided by the downhill slope of the hole, the feat was even more remarkable as the grass had been soaked by early morning rains.

George qualified for the US Open in 1923 shooting the same 36-hole score that day as Walter Hagen. His professional career was sidetracked, however, by inconsistent putting and the demands of tournament competition. His preference was to focus on teaching the game of golf.

George was deeply worried about the future of the game. The solution in his view was properly teaching it to young players. In his own words "The training of juniors is a professional obligation. It is something we owe golf, but even more important, it is something we owe the youngsters. It gives them an introduction to the greatest game in the world."

Jacobus started the RCC junior program in 1918. On Saturday mornings he gave free lessons to members' children. Professional at other clubs questioned his approach, particularly the notion of not charging! His preaching and teaching golf was not confined to RCC as he ran golf classes at local high schools and boys' and girls' clubs.

George rarely missed a teaching opportunity. He was known to dispense advice between eighteens in RCC's 36-hole club championship final. But it wasn't just the juniors and the most accomplished he wanted to help. He was often spotted on the golf patio in his familiar ascot tie and jacket greeting members with encouragement and suggestions as they completed their round.

As his golf pupils of all ages succeeded, George's reputation as a teacher spread throughout the golf world. In 1937 he was approached by three foreign gentlemen who wanted him to come home with them and talk about golf with their leader. George turned down their kind offer to meet Adolph Hitler.

Foremost among his accomplished pupils was the legendary Byron Nelson. When George attended the Masters in 1935, or Augusta Invitational as it was called at that time, he was looking to hire a young assistant professional. The day after meeting him he hired the skinny 23 year old from Texas to come to Ridgewood. Nelson would later credit Jacobus' teaching skills with helping him master a new swing that was better suited to the steel-shafted clubs that were changing the game and how it was taught. (A future History article will be devoted to Byron Nelson.)

George played a key role in the golf world outside the friendly confines of RCC. The PGA had been founded in 1916 partly as a result of the growing rift between those who believed competition should be strictly limited to amateurs versus the growing ranks of touring pros and teaching professionals who made their living from the sport. Jacobus served as president of the New Jersey section of the PGA for five terms before being elected president of the national PGA organization at age thirty-three. At the time of his election he was the first American-born professional and youngest man ever to hold that office.

George was president of the PGA an unprecedented seven years, 1932 -1939. He is credited by many with saving the PGA as an organization and in the process extending the career and influence of one of golf's greatest architects. The Great Depression wreaked havoc for professionals and golf clubs alike. Many professionals were unable or unwilling to continue to pay their dues while others dropped their membership. Clubs faced insolvency as they simultaneously dealt with heavy debt burdens and a torrential loss of members. Struggling to survive by cutting costs wherever they could, many clubs began to question the necessity of maintaining PGA salaried professionals on staff. Where was the benefit?

Jacobus' solution was brilliant. With few new courses being built in the 1930's, legendary architect and Ridgewood creator A.W. Tillinghast was facing financial ruin. George persuaded the PGA to retain Tillinghast as a golf course Architect-Consultant and have his services "extended without fees to golf courses throughout the United States wherever a PGA member is affiliated." Golf clubs that only a few years earlier would have paid princely sums for Tillinghast's advice were now able to benefit from his expertise for free. From 1935 to 1937 Tillinghast inspected and made suggestions for improvements on over 400 courses.

George also presided over a battle within the PGA between the club professionals and touring pros. Not surprisingly, his sympathies were with the club professionals who resented that touring pros were being hired by clubs at the expense of trained teaching professionals who were also skilled in club making. Particularly irksome to him was the growing number of touring pros who were "endorsing" golf equipment, conduct he deemed unprofessional.

During his career George developed a close relationship with many Major League Baseball players. He welcomed a number of them to "moonlight" at Ridgewood in the 1920's. The relationship led to George taking a winter position at Bobby Jones Gold Club in Sarasota, Florida where many players golfed during spring training.



Although baseball clubs owners initially frowned on players spending their days off golfing, over time they came to accept it. Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis approved of golfing as a way to keep the players out of bars. George began a National Baseball Players Golf Tournament in 1934 that he would oversee until his death in 1965. Babe Ruth was a frequent competitor and lost in the finals to Paul Waner in 1938.

The members of RCC honored George Jacobus with a fiftieth anniversary celebration on October 26, 1963. He was elected posthumously to the PGA Hall of Fame in 1983. Following a sudden heart attack George Jacobus died at age 67 in 1965. He is buried in the cemetery to the right of 4 Center.

Making the game enjoyable for others was his greatest pleasure. The George Jacobus Armageddon Tournament is among the Club's most popular competitions and the Jacobus Lounge opposite the men's lower locker room is a lasting tribute to his many contributions. A picture of George greets members in the newly decorated display case in the golfers' entrance.

